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TALK OF GUERRILLA FIGHTING IN BURMA

OSS Veteran Reunion Brings Youth News of Father

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In a room crowded with war veterans whose bonds of friendship were forged in savage jungle fighting, George Ikeda, 18, searched for information about a man he had loved.

Ikeda wanted to know about his father.

The elder Ikeda was an officer in Detachment 101 of the super-secret Office of Strategic Services and participated in the outfit's spectacular guerrilla exploits behind enemy lines in Burma during World War II. He died in an airplane crash six years ago.

"I suppose I just wasn't curious then about what kind of man my father was," Ikeda said. "But I want to find out now."

Ikeda, of Cabin John, Md., had been invited to the Shoreham Hotel where Detachment 101 held its annual reunion this week. At a reception, the Lehigh University sophomore examined photographs of the old outfit's personnel, read the unit's citations and tried to find his father's buddies.

Ikeda had another reason for attending. He is in the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps in college and some day may have to face the same type of guerrilla warfare in which his father engaged more than two decades ago.

"I don't think the people here want to relive the war," the young man said. "But the experiences of the war made them very close. If I went to Viet Nam, I would enjoy meeting others who went with me when it was all over."

Lt. Col. Dan Barnwell of Springfield, Va., was among the few who remembered Ikeda's father.

"We shared a tent for a time," Barnwell told the slender, blackhaired student. "Your dad was very industrious and wanted to learn the Burmese dialect. He would spend his spare time around the Burmese cooks to practice the language."

Barnwell shook his head and said: "I didn't even know he was dead until you told me."

Not many others recalled Hawaiian-born Capt. Chick Ikeda.

His son was told it was common for American officers to be detached from the main body of troops to serve for extended periods with native guerrillas, so that opportunities for friendships were limited.

Although Ikeda learned little about his father, he learned a lot about the tough, dirty, ruthless war in which his father fought. He heard of battles in places with Kiplingesque names, like Lawksawk, Pangtara, and Loilem. And he heard of tactics used by his father and other officers which today are being employed by the Viet Cong.

The detachment's first commander, Carl Eifler, of Monterey, Calif., described the group as "the only World War II unit behind enemy lines led by Americans." Its mission was to recruit and train Burmese natives for sabotage and intelligence operations in Japanese-held territory."

Eifler, a beefy, silver-haired psychologist, handpicked the first 21 men for the detachment.

"It came to a punk Army captain to implement special warfare in a quarter of the world," he said.

At its peak, Eifler's outfit grew to about 300 Americans—all volunteers — and 3,000 Burmese, mainly Kachin tribesmen. With this handful of men, the detachment covered a 10,000-square mile area of steaming jungles and impassable roads.

In its devastating hit-and-run operations, the detachment killed 5,000 Japanese troops while taking fewer than 400 casualties. In a key series of engagements near the Stillwell Road in Burma, the detachment killed 1,247 enemy soldiers and lost only 37 Americans and natives.

"We did what was necessary, by means fair or foul, to achieve our objectives," Eifler declared.

Eifler was an unusual man to head an unusual mission. A high school dropout, he enlisted in the Army in 1922. "They kicked me out when they found I was 15," he chuckled.

Later Eifler became a Los Angeles policeman, border patrol officer and building contractor. He joined the Army Reserve and was called to extended active duty shortly before the war started. Eifler was commanding a prisoner of war camp on Hawaii when he was summoned to Washington to form the detachment.

Discharged after a head wound sustained in a landing operation, Eifler quickly climbed the academic totem pole. He was graduated from high school and received four college degrees, including a doctorate in psychology.

What troubles Eifler today is that many of the weapons and tactics used by the detachment are being employed by the Viet Cong.

"They are fighting as we fought. It is difficult to overcome," he said. "They are picking the time and place to fight as we did."

There is an important difference, however.

"In Burma, we ran the guerrilla warfare and knew our enemy," said Al Richter, a captain with the detachment who is now a Falls Church businessman.

"In Viet Nam, the Viet Cong is the guerrilla and he knows who the enemy is."

Eifler's detachment utilized a brutal arsenal of homemade weapons. It perfected the punji—which were fire-hardened pieces of bamboo. Sometimes the punji sticks were stuck into balls and swung on a rope. "Anybody in its way got stuck," said Bill Martin, of Cheyenne, Wyo. "It could tear hell out of a man."

The punji sticks also were used in ambushes which became a trademark of the detachment. "We would line the jungle on either side with the sticks," said James Ward, of Bethesda, now a Foreign Service officer. He added:

"We would let the advance parties through, and then we would open up with machine guns at their front, and mortars at their rear. They couldn't go forward or backward, and the punji sticks prevented them from going in any other direction."

Ward pointed out that the group did not intend to annihilate the enemy but to "harass and kill as many as possible" before melting back into the jungle.

Few people at the reunion were interested in discussing strategy, tactics, and the long days without a decent meal in malaria-infested jungles.

"When you look back, you remember the good things," Ward said. "The bad side your memory doesn't dwell on."